

# SRI LANKA

## Spotlight Report on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on equity, gender, and financing in SDG 4 and role of education in the path towards sustainable and resilient recovery

### 1. Country Context

The Education sector has been severely impacted due to COVID-19 in Sri Lanka as the government focus was centered mainly on the health and economic recovery efforts. ADB predicted a decline of economic growth of -3.6% in 2020 for Sri Lanka and therefore, the economic activity of the country was forced to go to a more defensive stance. With closures of educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels, the stark digital divide in the country has been revealed. Apart from the major towns in Sri Lanka, most students do not have access to the internet and minimally required digital devices. In 2019, it was reported that one computer was available in 22.2% of households, with 38.3% in urban sector and 19.9% and 3.8% in rural and estate sectors, respectively. Sri Lanka's digital literacy in 2019 was 46% and computer literacy was at 30.8% with rural and estate sectors having only 28.6% and 13.7% (DCS).

Government has taken steps to improve the outreach; While the government introduced initiatives to advance e-learning through programs like "e-thaksalawa", national e-learning portal specially designed to deliver syllabuses of the students from grade 1 to 13, the shift to online learning received mixed reactions highlighting the socio-economic inequalities of the educational framework. With no previously established platforms or experience in digital education, both teachers and students have experienced high levels of stress when engaging in online education. Less than 50% of the students were reached online, and 30% through TV programs for the current solutions introduced to deliver classes. The high youth literacy (98.7%) rate in the country as reported in 2018 remains an advantage for Sri Lanka in the recovery process where hybrid education seems to be the possibility. Achieving much needed control over COVID spread in the country and opening the academic institutions in a systematic approach still seems to be the most viable solution.

Among recent initiatives taken in addition to the COVID related responses, President Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs was assigned to identify current issues concerning all aspects of pre-school and general education, critically review its effectiveness in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century needs and develop reform proposals to improve its quality and effectiveness and increase its contribution for the socio-economic development. This is despite several National Policies, Strategies and Action Plans being approved and released/in the draft stage and

awaiting release; namely the National Policy on General Education in Sri Lanka (2016) (Draft), the National Policy on Preschool Education (2019), the National Policy Framework on Higher Education and Tertiary and Vocational Education (2009), the National Policy on Tertiary and Vocational Education (2018) and the National Policy on Higher Education (2019) (Draft).

The quality of education has been criticised by the general population, activists, as well as educators as it is based on exam-based curriculum and has not improved and changed for some time. The education system is not producing holistic citizens and lags market needs for human resources. There is a lack of attention on non-formal education and a broad range of academic specializations leaving many youths behind in the process and discouraging them to pursue further education. Therefore, Sri Lanka needs to update the education policies accordingly and implement them in a timely manner so that no-one is left behind. Presidential Task Force is expected to come up with transformative reforms and programmes to ensure a quality education system while addressing targets of SDG 4. A result base compressive strategic framework that covers levels and dimensions to ensure inclusive distance learning programme must also be included in the reforms considering the experience from the COVID pandemic.

## **2. Financing and Equity Concerns in SDG 4 amidst COVID-19**

Sri Lanka historically has invested in free public education which can be considered as a key step towards leaving no one behind. However, the country cannot claim that it has been able to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Even though the right to a free education is enshrined in Sri Lanka's Constitution, the gap in resources and infrastructure for school education continues to create inequalities in the education system and sector. While some of the large national schools are overwhelmed with best of buildings, equipment, and facilities, many rural schools continue to suffer from lack of the minimum resources required. Regional disparities in facilities are also pronounced and the number of qualified teachers has also shown shortages. The most developed Western province has 0.4% of schools classified as 'very difficult', while the Northern Province has 30% followed by the Eastern and Central Provinces with 24%. Also, only 6% of the students who sit the examination are admitted to the universities.

Historically successive Central Governments of Sri Lanka have devoted only moderate percentages of the overall National Budget towards the unstructured, fragmented implementation of the targets now stated in SDG 4. Despite the decentralisation of Government Entities associated with SDG 4, the weak implementation of existing Parliamentary Legislation, National Policies and Strategies is quite visible. This is equally apparent, as you travel further down the devolution chain in both the Subnational (Provincial) and Local Governance Mechanisms. Although, there are some monitoring mechanisms in place, the reporting has been delayed. Among several reasons for this, main reason might be lack of a

data collection and processing mechanism. This hinders the ability to measure the effectiveness of the implementation of the existing policies.

Sri Lankan households are keen to pay for their children's education despite the financial difficulties driven by parent's concern about their children's education. This is a consequence of Sri Lankan culture being highly education oriented rather than consumption and entertainment oriented. A significant proportion of the household income is spent by the parents on their children's education despite the education is free in Sri Lanka. The cost of private tuition classes, technical courses, and private tertiary education for the students who cannot enter the state universities are where this spending is concentrated.

Over the last decade social pressure has been building up and the recent demands emphasize the importance of allocating at least 6% of the GDP for the state education sector. An increase in the annual budgetary provision for the education sector is a must to ensure the quality of the free education system in Sri Lanka. However, these demands have been often ignored by the governments to provide ad-hoc solutions which do not uplift the sector. Looking at this from the sustainable development point of view, Sri Lanka, with the economic growth impacted by COVID19 (-3.6% forecasted for 2020 by ADB), heavy external debt and multiple socio-economic challenges, is more challenged by survival at present within the Covid-19 pandemic than investing in the SDGs and long-term sustainability programs. After 5 years, Sri Lanka does not have a clear roadmap, policy, strategy, action plan, monitoring mechanism and a financing plan for the SDGs at national and subnational levels. Similarly, financing SDG 4 is yet to have an overall plan to be able to achieve the stipulated targets. UNESCAP suggests that Sri Lanka needs an annual additional investment of 4.4% of the 2018 GDP through 2030 to provide a social protection floor (1.7%), poverty gap transfers (0.2%), quality education (1.6%) and climate-resilient infrastructure (0.8%). Further, with the pandemic striking the Sri Lankan economy, it is expected to reduce 0.359 of GDP (319.4 million USD) in Sri Lanka and will seriously affect the implementation of SDG 4. GOSL will need to rethink about how to ensure equity and inclusion under pandemic/ emergency situations.

This report looks at the *equity concerns* from the point of view SDG 4 targets. As leaving no one behind is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, Sri Lanka's performance under SDG targets reveals the underlying concerns as well as opportunities. In terms of SDG 4.1 Sri Lanka has done quite well to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education in the context of access to education free of charge. Sri Lanka's net enrolment for primary education is 99% and for junior secondary level is at 84%. It has been reported that on average Sri Lankan students attend 10 years which is higher than elsewhere in the South Asia, which is around 6. However, it is often seen that the term 'free education' is being narrowly defined and misinterpreted at times. The most common interpretation is "the education that is offered free of charges" is free education, which is inaccurate. It is free such way where every citizen is enabled to access the formal national education system and letting all the citizens of the country an equal opportunity to take a part of it in order to develop a cultivated and

responsible citizen. According to a recent publication by Jayawardena, “Free Education is not only to provide ‘education’ at free of cost, but to provide equitable access to every child irrespective of the demography, exploit the individual strengths and cultivate good values to become a law-abiding citizen”. There are questions raised in Sri Lanka whether the education provided is relevant and leading to effective learning outcomes due to the stagnant pace of transformation of the education system in the country. World Bank reports that the available evidence suggests that learning outcomes in Sri Lanka do not meet international standards. As of 2017, Sri Lanka has never participated in such international assessments as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). In 2009 Sri Lanka added a TIMSS module to the National Assessments, which made it possible to benchmark some national learning outcomes against international standards. This assessment showed that Sri Lanka spends much less per pupil, and its learning outcomes trail those of middle- and high-income countries. While education provided free of charge provides incredible benefits to the children and youth in terms of continued access to education, the lack of effectiveness can hinder the overall benefit.

In terms of SDG 4.2, access to early childhood education (ECE) is still low in Sri Lanka compared to most middle and high-income countries. Early Childhood Development (ECD) recognizes the different stages of child development from birth until entry in primary school through different programs. ECE is a subset of ECD. There are about 17,000 centres in Sri Lanka that unroll nearly 475,000 children in the ages of 3-5. About 60% of these centres are managed by the private sector and the rest by government and NGOs. There are existing disparities by income and location and the majority share of early education centres, primary education, and secondary education lacks adequate resources for teaching and learning, especially for children with special needs. As a result, only about half of pre-school aged children in Sri Lanka have access to these centres.

In terms of SDG 4.3, Sri Lanka has limited access to affordable technical, vocational, and higher education. Access to higher education institutions in which the course content is delivered free of charge takes place after the highly competitive GCE A/L examination. Higher education institutions under the University Grants Commission in Sri Lanka are required to adhere to the regional quota system. While this ensures a portion of disadvantaged students get access to education, the percentage of students who are admitted to these institutions from the GCE A/L exams remains exceptionally low. In 2012, 60% of the students passed the GCE A/L examination, but only about 17% were admitted to a university or a similar level institution. Other middle-income countries averaged around 30% in 2014. Sri Lanka also has a huge disparity between secondary education enrolment and tertiary level enrolment compared to other middle-income countries. The students who do not qualify for a state university must then seek private education institutes or foreign universities to continue their tertiary education. These students are highly frustrated and treated by the prevailing free education system. Ministry of Higher Education can grant private universities degree awarding authority or program-based recognition. As of 2014, non-state institutions have enrolled around 69,000 based on the reports. Admission to the private institutions based in Sri Lanka are also based on

A/L exam results. Furthermore, there are unregistered providers that operate by seeking affiliation with foreign universities. By 2015, registered students in such institutions were about 4,500. Privately offered tertiary education has been a regular topic of discussion in Sri Lanka where the minimum standards are regularly questioned and debated. In 2017, there were mass protests held against some such institutions, which brought about doubts about the accreditation process followed by the government on the private tertiary level education. These concerns need to be resolved to remove the bottleneck experienced by Sri Lanka after providing access up to secondary level education. With the above levels of access to the tertiary education, the system overall has not been able to effectively address the changing financial and market trends. As a result, many graduates are left without decent jobs and has resulted in a series of protests occurring on streets demanding decent jobs for the received education. This can also be attributed to the lack of guidance and awareness created for the students matching the market opportunities with the offered programs. At the same time students have the right to pursue the expertise they are passionate and skilful about. However, given the current environment, they must endure great difficulties in the process of building a career based on such expertise.

In terms of SDG 4.4, shortages of technically skilled personnel for the marketplace is a key issue due to lack of equitable treatment and investment in the TVET sector. Education in TVET sector ranges from certificate programs, apprenticeship training, and degree programs. TVET sector mostly targets the school leavers with GCE O/L or GCE A/L qualifications. It was reported that by 2011, 557 public TVET institutions offered 737 accredited courses that covered 23 fields of study that lead to national education diplomas. A National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF) was initiated in Sri Lanka in 2009. Some of the TVE credentials offered in Sri Lanka fall within this framework. national certificates, national diplomas, and Level 7 bachelor's degrees are most common qualifications within NVQF. At the same time Department of Technical Education and Training (DTET), Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC), Vocational Training Authority (VTA), and National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA) have been established to oversee a wide range of TVET programs in Sri Lanka. Therefore, there is an established institutional frameworks and mandates already available in the sector. The unequal attention and recognition given to vocational education and being treated with lower quality of education standards in social ranking has been main concerns in the sector. According to the COPE Budget Report 2019, allocations to TVET sector have reduced in real terms, contrary to the expectations set by government policy. Government allocation to TVET in 2019 is Rs. 11,268 million; At the same time, the TVET budget was underspent by 25.6% - with underspending of the relevant capital budget as much as 44.5%.

SDG 4.5 brings about an important discussion on Inclusion and Equity and Gender Equality in education. The constitution of Sri Lanka commits the state to promote the interest of children and youth, ensuring their full development, to protect them from exploitation and discrimination, while ensuring universal access to education. Although Sri Lanka had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 12 July 1991, to date, it has not been directly incorporated into national law. Sri Lanka has, however, expressed its view that many of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) are in line with many of the

current rights espoused by the 1978 Sri Lankan Constitution. The national child protection policy was cabinet approved in October 2019 and needs to be launched and operationalized. Gender parity has been achieved in Sri Lanka in Early Children Education (ECE) and junior secondary enrolment according to the Sri Lanka Education Assessment report published by the World Bank in 2017.

Youth are seen largely missing out from the national decision-making processes, including in parliamentary representation. In 2014, Sri Lanka launched the National Youth Policy (NYP) that recognized nine key strategic areas for policy interventions in education, skills development, and vocational training. The NYP has identified young women as a 'priority target group'. The lack of streamlining of all youth related policies and frameworks, may result in ad-hoc approaches, strategies, and national programmes, that are not relating to and corresponding to issues and areas previously identified for priority action. Quite recently there has been some bipartisan conversation taking place to encourage at least 25% of the nominations presented to local elections be young persons and it was reported that an opposition parliamentarian has already placed a bill in parliament on the matter. Pertaining to a series of examples, gender, human rights, inclusion, culture of peace, nonviolence, peer to peer learning and equality are in policy documents but not practiced due lack of comprehension. Sri Lanka had ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, but some of its provisions are yet to be incorporated into national legislation. The key concerns in the concluding observations of CEDAW state the need to strengthen the implementation mechanisms including human resources and skills, strengthen the laws, policies and action plans concerning women in a women participated manner and improving efficiency of judicial procedures to address gender based violence (GBV), combat discriminatory gender stereotypes in education and mainstream gender into national education policies including the Education Sector Development Framework and Programmes. Gender equality is a cross cutting issue identified in the SDG framework and correlates and corresponds with many of the SDG targets and indicators and the elimination of discrimination and violence against women is vital for eradication of inequalities.

Sri Lanka has performed well in SDG 4.6 due to the provision of early learning and development opportunities. This has improved learning outcomes in terms of basic literacy and numeracy, reduce dropouts, and increase school retention. Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above) in Sri Lanka has been above 90% since 2001 and in 2018, it was 91.71% based on World Bank data. It can be stated that Sri Lanka has the potential to achieve universal literacy and numeracy by 2030.

SDG 4.7 draws a link between education and sustainable development and focuses on "Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship". Though the education sector has received a lot of Official Development Assistance for educational reform, consecutive governments have not given adequate priority to ensure that learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to 'promote' sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Gender, human rights, inclusion, culture of peace and nonviolence peer to peer learning equality are in policy documents but not in practice. It is observed that learning programs on above key topics are

regularly challenged and therefore, the opportunity to establish consistent medium of delivery has been difficult. Quality of education in Sri Lanka is highly questioned due to its heavy focus on exam-based curriculum. It has been pointed out in many forums that this approach fails to create value based holistic citizens and does not provide adequate supply to market needs at the same time. Private tuition (support classes established in addition to the school) plays a critical factor in education and examination outcomes and creates unequal opportunities between the rich and poor. Also, the delivery of the content is solely focussed on tackling exams and therefore, nourishment of the student does not take place in these platforms. While rural schools have a shortage of skilled teachers, students in rural areas also have limited opportunities for private tuition as well and sometimes must take public transportation for hours to get to the cities where classes are conducted.

### **3. Embedding SDG 4 in Other SDGs**

While Sri Lanka demonstrates many positive indicators on education, these programs and policies are yet to be aligned with the SDGs. In 2017, Sri Lanka formulated Early Childhood Care and Development Policy. In 2019 a policy draft was compiled as a school-based career policy by National Education commission and British Council. This is a framework to formulate career guidance teachers and a school curriculum on career guidance for the development education sector. This framework is also a tool kit to motivate students from grade 6 onwards on career path planning which is also suitable to help student dropouts. Four Ministries with primary responsibility and implementing SDG4 targets are the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training, Ministry of Youth. These ministries have not been able to establish coordination and formulate a policy framework or adopt the SDGs into the existing education policy frameworks. There is no central focal coordination mechanism for SDG4 in the country.

Stakeholders related to SDG4 have had minimum or no engagement opportunities in forming a plan of implementation or towards collective action with government authorities. The lack of a dialogue between stakeholders and public authorities relevant to SDG4 has created uncertainties on taking forward the targets and establishing a monitoring process. To implement a quality educational framework a monitoring mechanism in all sectors of education should take place in future as mandated with equipped facilities by physically and psychologically. There are very sound policies in the education system but there is huge gap in understanding and implementation of the existing policies.

Not achieving target 4.7 and the indicators will result in poor performance on Environment Education affecting SDG 2, SDG 12, SDG 13, SDG 14, SDG 15. Improving Target 4.2 will assist in alleviating poverty SDG 1, ECD interventions buffer the negative effect of stress thereby improving absorption of nutritional intake, positively impacting SDG 2, will affect good lifelong health (SDG 3), promote decent work (SDG 8), reduce inequality (SDG 10), Ensure sustainable consumption (SDG 12), and promote peaceful societies (SDG 16). Improving 4.3 Target will ensure decent work (SDG 8), reduce inequality (SDG 10), increase women participation (SDG5)

and promote peaceful societies (SDG 16). Not achieving SDG 4.1 will directly impact on SDG 5.5 Target as women will not be educated for decision making level. By achieving SDG 4.4 will help to improve employment (SDG9).

#### **4. Role of Education in Sustainable and Resilient Recovery**

Education creates, preserves, and sustains the right knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the context of the social value system. This is crucial for the wellbeing of any civilized society. Education also focus on creating and dissemination of knowledge, skills, and values with the view of developing and empowering a holistic and a responsible citizen. Ultimately the education improves the quality of the human resource of the country and higher the quality of the human resources, higher the resilience. Therefore, access to education is extremely important if education is to play a role in the resilient recovery. There are several key solutions offered by the government to enable access to education during the pandemic like the online e-learning platform, LMS learning portals of state academic institutions, and TV telecasting of the classes. Additionally, the school textbooks, tutorials are uploaded in government portals where students can access without additional internet data.

At the same time, there has been reports that government has not been able to bear the cost of internet data of the educators. Throughout the pandemic period teachers had to bear the additional costs related to switching to online delivery of academic content. This has led to protests across Sri Lanka where teachers having to demand increases in remuneration. Even before the pandemic, it had been noted that school teachers have been less privileged in terms of their low salary, lack of training and development opportunities, and no insurance cover, leaving them highly vulnerable in case of an emergencies . Although it had been recommended by experts and the activists in the field to increase the school teachers' salary to a level reasonably adequate to ensure attracting and retaining the right people in the school system and periodically offer them with training opportunities locally or overseas, no action was taken until this point. This situation has put the education of thousands of students at risk of missing out on their academic activities. Therefore, the resolution of these issues will be critical for the role of education in the recovery period.

The government has included education in the recovery plans to a certain extent but misses out on key components. Awareness on the natural environment and natural resources is a vital component that needs to be integrated into education. Furthermore, knowledge on disaster risk reduction, climate change, equality and equity, marginalized communities, gender, sex, and legal system are extremely important in an education system that is geared towards recovery. So far, these aspects are not adequately covered. Education system needs to be transformed during this critical period to ensure that it contributes to sustainability and resilience of the community. Skills accumulated during this period by the youth will prepare them to face the potential difficult times foreseen for the recovery period. Both formal and non-formal

education will play an important role to provide skills necessary for employment opportunities that may arise from post COVID investments. The skills requirements may be significantly changed during this time and it is vital that the necessary reforms. One main concern in Sri Lanka even prior to COVID pandemic was the lack of suitable employment opportunities matching with the education provided. A World Bank report in 2017 points out that Sri Lankan workforce lacks adequate job-specific skills to meet the increasing demand. Therefore, this is the ideal time to make the education system align with the employment types that Economy can facilitate rather than solely dependent on historical trends. A conducive environment should be available for youth to initiate new ventures. Investments, financing, soft skills development, physical and mental health awareness, media spaces, ICT, and technology facilitation and/or transfer are some key areas that needs to be improved to create such an environment. This comes with an urgent need to create awareness as well.

The decision makers at all levels should be skilled enough to understand the challenges to the growth and make timely decisions to strengthen the growth. Education plays a key role in capacity development of these decision makers. With these transformations, education system shall create a versatile citizen who is able to accept the challenges presented during the post pandemic era. This citizen would be able to enter the market as job creators to reduce unemployment levels caused by the pandemic. Increased awareness of the environment will ensure that the nature and the wildlife is protected. Awareness of the community and the law shall safeguard communities and reduce vulnerabilities. The focus on the non-formal and lifelong learning can transform the job market and expand the opportunities for all citizens.

## **5. Recommendations**

Education system of a country plays a crucial role in achieving a sustainable and integral development and it is treated as the backbone of any civilized society. Therefore, to address the targets and indicators cohesively and structurally in SDG 04, the following recommendations must be considered. Firstly, the Ministry of Education (MoE), through the National Institute of Education (NIE) should screen existing curricula/pedagogy to prioritise the most suitable sections/units that can be easily adopted for online education. Secondly, both the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) should lead the process in collaboration with Provincial Ministries of Education. Thirdly, instead of depending on the National Budget and large-scale loan funded projects, the Ministry of Education (MoE) should raise additional grant funds, which it currently does not appear to be interested in or not capable of raising such funds. Fourthly, Climate Education, Sexual Education, Disaster Risk Reduction Training, and Legislation should be adopted in the existing curriculum. Fifthly, there needs to be serious strengthening accountability mechanisms, as no baselines or midline evaluations in locally funded or mega loan funded projects currently exist, and final evaluations have a tendency to be outsourced. Sixthly, the annual budgeting and funding allocation cycle need to be reviewed to make sure that the appropriate funding dedicated for education gets

fully utilised, with a mechanism put in place to facilitate the above recommendation. Seventhly, resources should be added proportionally for all Education Entities based on the planned increases in intake. This includes physical resources like buildings, accommodation, teaching equipment and human resources. Finally, Teacher/Lecturer/Professor/Educator training should be improved for both online and offline delivery considering the country moving towards a hybrid delivery and more training institutions should be established. Non-formal education efforts and lifelong learning options should be introduced at the Provincial Ministerial level, while establishing related facilities.

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